

# **International students as young migrant workers in South Australia: The role of the University in occupational health and safety awareness and education**

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for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy



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## **DECLARATION**

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# **ABSTRACT**

## ***Problem Statement***

Despite the possibility of major under-reporting, young workers are over-represented in injury statistics. Among this group are international students, who constitute a significant and rising proportion of young workers in part-time, casual or seasonal jobs. International students may be at greater risk for occupational injury than their domestic peers because of cultural issues, language barriers, financial pressures and the nature of the work available to them. Thus, they represent a vulnerable segment of the workforce. There is a need to better understand their risk profile and develop evidence-based interventions to reduce risk.

## ***Gap Analysis***

There is a substantial body of literature on young workers, including migrant workers. However, limited research has been conducted regarding international students as a vulnerable subpopulation in the Australian workplace context. Furthermore, the role of the university as a potential (or actual) provider of occupational health and safety (OHS) awareness and education for international students has been poorly explored.

## ***Purpose Statement***

The ultimate goal of this research is to reduce accident and injuries among international students as young migrant workers. The aims are to explore their work experiences while studying at university, and understand their perspectives on

OHS, including the role of the university in occupational illness and injury prevention.

### ***Research Questions***

Two broad two research questions are proposed:

1. What are the work health and safety experiences of international students as young migrant workers?
2. What is the role of the university in terms of OHS awareness raising and education among international student employees?

### ***Methodology***

Four complementary approaches were employed to answer the research questions. These comprised two statistical reviews and two empirical studies in a parallel mixed methods research design.

1. Statistical reviews:

- a. *Injury claims experience from South Australian Workers Compensation data (2004-2013).* For the purpose of this statistical review, an international student was defined as a worker between the ages of 15-24 years who was non-Australian born and of non-English speaking background.
- b. *Working experience from the 2013 University of Adelaide International Student Barometer (ISB) Survey.* The survey is run on a regular basis to gauge perceptions and to improve services for international students.

## 2. Empirical studies

- a. *An online questionnaire survey of international students at the University of Adelaide.* This was designed to explore working experiences, injury experiences and work-study interference.
- b. *A qualitative focus group study of international students at the University of Adelaide.* This explored the perceived current practice of OHS education in the University and its potential injury-preventive role for work outside of the University.

### ***Main Findings***

#### Statistical reviews of workers compensation data and ISB survey data

Young workers were more likely to experience serious injuries if they were: Non-Australian born, Odds Ratio (OR) = 1.20 (CI: 1.07-1.35); Non-English speaking background (NESB), OR = 1.38 (CI: 1.09-1.76); Older young workers (20-24 yr old), OR = 1.38 (1.29-1.47); Female, OR = 1.51 (1.41-1.61); Outdoor workers OR = 1.87 (1.73-2.02). These data are consistent with international students being at greater risk compared to local young workers.

The majority of participants in the ISB 2013 survey (n=656) reported that they were being underpaid. Male students were more likely to be in paid employment compared to females, who were more likely to be in a voluntary job. In addition, this study found a gap between male and female overseas students concerning their average income.



### Online survey of international students

This study (n = 466) found international students worked in part-time jobs (55.3%), casual (39.2%) and seasonal employment (5.4%). The majority were engaged in restaurants (42.1%), supermarkets or grocery stores (21.1%) and in cleaning jobs (12.6%). Sixty percent reported that they did not receive any OHS training before commencing the work and 10% reported that they had experienced an injury in an Australian workplace. Of those with OHS training, 43% experienced injury after the training. About 65% of students felt that work adversely impacted on study, with tiredness being the main form of interference.

Injury experience and perceptions of work-study interference were modelled with logistic regression. Significant predictors of injury were working 20 hours or more per week, adjusted odds ratio (AOR) = 2.20 (CI: 1.03-4.71); lack of confidence in discussing OHS issues, AOR = 2.17 (CI: 1.13-4.16); a perception of unfair wages or feeling exploited, AOR = 2.42 (CI: 1.24-4.71); and being a second year student in either undergraduate or postgraduate programs, AOR = 2.69 (CI: 1.04-6.96). For work-study interference, the corresponding variables were working 20 hours or more per week, OR=1.91 (CI: 1.08-3.41); a perception of unfair wages, OR=1.89 (CI: 1.31-2.75); being a second year student, OR= 1.80 (CI: 1.02-3.18); being a holder of a partial scholarship, OR=1.98 (CI: 1.14-3.43); and lack of confidence in discussing OHS issues, OR=2.05 (CI: 1.41-2.99).

### Focus group discussions

This study (3 groups, n = 21) found that international students had multiple reasons to work while studying, and it was not all about earning money. Improving their English, adapting to Australian culture and making friends were cited as other reasons to work.

There were mixed experiences relating to work-study interference. Some participants revealed that they had experienced negative impacts of long working hours on study. However, other students argued that there was reduced impact when the jobs were flexible, were undertaken in a vacation period, on the weekends, or when the working hours did not exceed 20 hours a week.

Similarly, there were mixed views regarding OHS. Some participants were not concerned about the risks, even if they understood the hazard.

Student perspectives on OHS training and education tended to be shaped by their experiences and study backgrounds. With regard to the current University of Adelaide practices on OHS education, it was found that there was a different emphasis between the schools of engineering and social sciences. The participants recalled OHS information and education being provided but felt that this tended to focus on student security and safety around the University environment. Participants felt that there was little or no consideration of work outside of the University. Some suggested that the institutional concern about students' working life should be raised from "zero" to "hero". The University should better prepare international students to work in the community as part of its social responsibility and duty of care. The role of the University was to provide generic or basic

knowledge such as workers' rights and responsibilities. However, this could never replace specific on-the-job training provided by employers.

### ***Novelty and Implications***

This research is the first to explore the combination of international students' working experiences, injury experiences, work-study interference and perspectives on the role of the University in preventing injuries in students' working life.

The findings from statistical reviews and the online survey provide new evidence about international student vulnerabilities in the workplace. When these findings were integrated with the qualitative data, a conceptual framework for the prevention of injury was derived, identifying the University as a key stakeholder.

Finally, the research provides new evidence for improving the effectiveness of OHS education for international students.

### ***Conclusions and Recommendations***

On the basis of this research, it is clear that international students have multiple vulnerabilities and that there are particular risk factors for occupational injury and work-study interference. Students expressed the view that the University should do more to support their work activity while studying. It is highly likely that the findings from the University of Adelaide can be generalised to other universities. Universities are effectively sponsors of students into the local community, but have a limited awareness of their contribution to the local workforce. As such, there is a social responsibility which extends beyond academic

and social support to encompass work life. A better understanding of work arrangements may also improve academic performance.

A series of recommendations are made for the universities, OHS regulators, ISB providers and future researchers. These include:

- better preparation of international students for integration into workplaces;
- regulation of the hours of work and the prevention of exploitation;
- continued use of the ISB as one means of monitoring student work experience, and benchmarking across universities and states;
- a longitudinal study of international students; and
- exploring the perceptions of academics and university administrators to complement the findings from students.

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## ABBREVIATIONS

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
AEI	Australian Education International
ASSE	American Society for Safety Engineers
AOR	Adjusted Odds Ratio
CI	Confidence Interval
CRICOS	Commonwealth Register of Institutions and Courses for Overseas Students
DECS	Department for Education and Children Services
DFAT	Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade
DIAC	Department of Immigration and Citizenship
DEEWR	Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations
EAP	English for Academic Purposes
EEWR	Education, Employment and Workplace Relations
ELICOS	English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students
ESB	English Speaking Background
ESOS	Education Services for Overseas Students
EU-OSHA	European Agency for Safety and Health at Work
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
HREC	Human Research Ethics Committee
ILO	International Labour Organization
ISS	International Student Survey
IBP	Integrated Bridging Program
ISB	International Student Barometer

ISC	International Student Centre
IWH	Institute of Work and Health, Canada
NHMRC	National Health and Medical Research Council
NESB	Non-English Speaking Background
NIOSH	U.S. National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health
OHS	Occupational Health and Safety
OHS&W	Occupational Health, Safety and Welfare
OHSW	Occupational Health, Safety and Welfare
OR	Odds Ratio
RQ	Research question
SA	South Australia
SPSS	Statistical Package for the Social Sciences
SWSA	SafeWork SA
TAFE	Technical and Further Education
TOOCS	Type of Occurrence Classification System
UK	United Kingdom
UKCISA	United Kingdom Council for International Student Affairs
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
USA	United State of America
VET	Vocational Education and Training
WHO	World Health Organisation

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